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SUBJECT: CROATIAN PRESS COVERAGE OF PRIME MINISTER SANADER'S VISIT
TO WASHINGTON, OCTOBER 15-18, 2006

¶1. Summary. Reporting on Croatian Prime Minister Sanader's visit to Washington was mainly positive in tone and grew more enthusiastic as the visit drew to an end, though a few commentaries wondered what concessions Croatia might have made to earn the top-level treatment that Sanader received in the U.S. All media reports quoted President Bush saying that it was in the "world's interest" that Croatia should enter NATO in 2008, and noted his stated intention to support Croatia's bid for full membership at the Riga summit. End Summary

¶2. Following the first day of Sanader's visit in Washington, Croatian dailies carried reports about the meeting with Secretary Rice and her support for Croatia's accession to the EU and NATO. The media saw Sanader's meetings with the senior levels of the administration as an indication of how much the U.S. administration values the Prime Minister and good bilateral relations.

¶3. Croatian Television (HTV), the most influential media outlet in Croatia, gave extensive coverage to the visit. In addition to lengthy reports prior to and during the visit on the main evening news program, HTV also had special programs dedicated to the visit, and carried the press opportunity with President Bush and Prime Minister Sanader in its entirety on late evening news on Tuesday, October 17. Prior to PM Sanader's departure to Washington, HTV also interviewed Ambassador Bradtke.

Triumph or Tradeoff?

¶4. The Bush-Sanader meeting was reported in all media as a triumph of Sanader's policy. Most dailies carried the story on the front page with large photos of Sander and Bush shaking hands. All Croatian newspapers quoted President Bush saying it was in the "world's interest" that Croatia should enter NATO in 2008, which is why he would support its bid for full membership at the Riga summit.

HTV's Washington correspondent Branka Slavica commented in her October 18 report on the positive atmosphere and success of the meeting, noting the Croatian delegation's satisfaction with the visit. She pointed out that even Prime Minister Sanader himself did not expect such open support from the U.S. President, adding that no open issues remained between the two countries. All media reported that PM Sanader invited President Bush to visit Croatia. Even newspapers usually critical of PM Sanader and his government noted that his visit to Washington was extremely successful and important for Croatia.

¶5. Zagreb-based weekly "Globus" columnist Jelena Lovric assessed the visit as good for Croatia but claimed that Croatia's promise to double its number of troops in Afghanistan and the Government's perceived support of U.S. company Barr's purchase of Croatian pharmaceutical company Pliva were Sanader's concessions to Washington. She concluded that it was still not completely clear

what Sanader will bring back in return. Zagreb-based financial/business daily "Poslovni dnevnik" implied that there was a potential link between the visit and the pending decisions on the Croatian Government's purchase of APCs and military planes, for which General Dynamics is one of the bidders.

¶ 16. Rijeka-based national daily "Novi list" speculated about the connection of the visit with the U.S. rumored interest in investing in Croatia's energy sector and in the ports of Rijeka and Omisalj.

¶ 17. Deana Knezevic's commentary in the October 19 edition "Vecernji list," titled "Croatia as a partner," reminded readers that whatever he might have promised to the U.S., Sanader does not have the authority to make decisions on sending soldiers to Afghanistan or signing an Article 98 Agreement. Knezevic, however, said that because Sanader is a friend of the U.S., the U.S. administration will not ask him to make moves that would jeopardize the upcoming (2007) Croatian elections.

President Bush to Croatia?

¶ 18. Damir Grubisa, Rijeka-based "Novi list" commentator, saw the visit as a good thing for Croatia, but decided that democracy in Croatia is still struggling and that kind words from the U.S. will not help the state of affairs in Croatia. Davor Butkovic in Zagreb-based mass-circulation "Jutarnji list" speculated that Prime Minister Sanader's very successful visit could boost his chances in next year's elections in Croatia.

¶ 19. Most papers carried stories on Bush's and Rumsfeld's possible visits to Croatia, possibly to Split (even claiming that Croatian Ambassador to the U.S. Neven Jurica has already received confirmation from the Pentagon that Secretary Rumsfeld will visit in spring 2007).

Good News on NATO

¶ 10. As the week went on, reports focused on Croatia's NATO entry, speculating on what the supportive language on NATO entry meant for Croatia, with several newspapers quoting Sanader as saying that the meeting was "historical" and important for opening the doors to NATO. Croatian press also reported on the "reliable partner" that Croatia has become to America. Most commentaries said that this support will also be useful to Croatia's strategy in EU negotiations. Rijeka-based "Novi list" discussed what Sanader's strategy will be for convincing the Croatian public that joining NATO is a positive thing, quoting him as saying that had Croatia been in NATO in 1991 there would not have been a war.

Sanader Has the Last Word

¶ 11. Zagreb-based mass-circulation "Jutarnji list" on Saturday, October 21, carried an interview with PM Sanader in which he said that the success of the visit was not the result of any kind of bargaining or deals but, rather, was due to Croatia's recent policies and actions, led by him personally, President Mesic, and the Croatian Parliament.

¶ 12. Comment: One Croatian newspaper characterized the visit as "three days which will change Croatia's future." Certainly, government officials were openly very pleased with the visit, and their enthusiasm was reflected in all media coverage, largely drowning out the few critical commentaries musing about under-the-table deals. Still, clearly underlying most reporting was surprise among journalists and their editors, who had grown accustomed to recycling headlines about strained relations, that the U.S. and Croatia were "suddenly" friends, and also a touch of disappointment that supposed points of serious contention they had reported for years hadn't even been raised at the meeting.

BRADTKE